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Vol. I.

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No. I.

SMART ALECK;

OR,
A Crank's Legacy.
BY "FRANK."



MR. SQUIGGS WAS IN TIME TO RECEIVE A BLOW IN THE STOMACH, WHICH MRS. DUSENBURY INTENDED FOR HER WORSE HALF.

SMART ALECK;

OR,

A Crank's Legacy.

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CHAPTER I.

A STARTLING ANNOUNCEMENT.

"Aleck, Professor Sprouts wants to see you at once." Alexander Smart uttered a groan.

"Is that so, Swipes? Wait till I put on my trousers with the sole-leather lining. This'll make the twenty-fourth licking I've had this term. Never mind, to-morrow's the last day, and I kind of wanted to make up the two dozen before the new term begins."

"I don't believe it's a licking this time, Aleck."

"Come off!" said the boy, scornfully. "The old professor never wants to see me for any purpose except to half knock the life out of me. I guess he's found out about the flea powder?"

"What flea powder?"

"Haven't you heard about that, Swipesy? You know the professor's little cur dog, Angelo, boards and lodges a large colony of insects in various parts of his anatomy?"

"Yes."

"And you are also aware that Professor Sprouts devotes a great deal of attention to Angelo's toilet, and shoots about a quart of Knockemflat's Insect Destroyer at him from a powder gun every day."

"I know it."

"Well, I filled the gun with cayenne pepper last evening, about an hour before the professor began operations on the dog."

"What was the result?"

"It isn't known yet. Angelo was seen traveling through Ohio at the rate of a mile or so a minute, at an early hour this morning, but there are still many States to be heard from. He and Sprouts both pretty nearly sneezed their heads off, and I understand that the old man has offered a reward for the detection of the infamous wretch who put up the job."

"Yourself, in other words."

"Alas, yes, Swipesy! And I guess some one has given me away."

"I don't believe that's it, Aleck. The old man seems a good deal excited over a letter he has just received, and I guess it's something about you."

"Is that so? May be it's from my long lost father."

"Who is your father, anyhow, Aleck," asked Swipes, curiously.

"Ah, thereby hangs a tale," sighed Aleck.

"Why, is he a monkey? I shouldn't wonder, judging from the way you conduct yourself most of the time."

"Don't be personal, Swipes. No, my long lost parent is not a monkey, but, if reports can be relied upon, he is the biggest crank in his neighborhood. I can't speak from personal knowledge, though, for I never saw him."

"Never saw your father?"

"Not to remember. Wouldst hear the story of my life, Swipesy?"

"The story of your life?"

"Yes; I feel in a confidential mood this afternoon, and I don't mind giving myself away. Sit down on yon richly upholstered trunk, and lend me your ear."

"But the professor is waiting for you."

"You said that before; let him wait. He's tired after his day's work, and needs rest, and I'd just as lief take my thrashing an hour from now, when he'll be in better condition to give it."

"He'll kill me if I don't bring you right down."

"Never mind; you'll die in a good cause. Now listen, will you?"

"Well, go ahead."

To the horror of Swipes—for smoking in the Busterville Academy was strictly forbidden—Aleck lighted a cigarette. Then, seating himself on the bed, he began his story.

"I was born at an early age of wealthy but honest parents, in the city of New York. I inherited my rare beauty from my mother."

"Give me a rest, Aleck."

"Don't interrupt me. My father was one of the biggest cranks

that ever lived. When he once made up his mind to a thing nothing could turn him."

"That doesn't seem likely—you can most always turn a crank."

"Don't be funny, Swipes—I am saddest when you jest. If there was anything my father was particular about it was his meals. His food must be cooked just so, or he wouldn't eat it. My mother was an awfully bad cook."

"An unlucky combination. I shouldn't think they would have got along well together."

"They didn't. After eating under-done bread and over-done beefsteaks two years my father became a confirmed dyspeptic. Then he got mad."

"Don't blame him."

"Neither do I, but I think he went too far."

"How far did he go?"

"To New Jersey, where he procured a divorce on the ground of cruel and inhuman treatment. Then he and my mother separated forever. Three years later my mother died from indigestion caused by eating a mince pie of her own manufacture."

"Then what became of you?"

"My father refused to take me home—in fact he hadn't any home to take me to, for he spent most of his time traveling. He wouldn't even see me—all he would do was to pay for my support! So I was sent to Busterville Academy, and placed under the charge of Professor Melville Sprouts—and here I am."

There was silence for a few moments.

"Well," questioned Aleck, "what do you think of my story?"

"What do I think of it?"

"That's what I asked. I expected you to shed a few more or less bitter tears."

"I think it's a blamed lie from beginning to end, Aleck Smart, and only a part of some job you are getting ready to put up."

Aleck shrugged his shoulders.

"That shows the sort of reputation I have won here. Well, I guess I've earned it. All the same, old man, I've told you the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth."

"All right; but in the meantime Professor Sprouts has been waiting for you."

"I guess I'll go and see what's troubling the old man. Perhaps he wants to take my measure for a gold medal."

And the youth meandered out of the room.

Alexander Smart—or Smart Aleck, as his friends, for obvious reasons, chose to call him—had, as he said, earned a reputation in the Busterville Academy as a practical joker of the first water.

There was probably no one in the establishment, from the cook to the principal, who had not at some time or other been a victim of his pranks.

Professor Sprouts had the advantage of his subordinates and his pupils in that he could revenge himself upon Aleck by caning him thoroughly, and he availed himself of this privilege with great frequency.

The painful tale which we have heard the boy relate, and which his companion saw fit to doubt, was really the plain, unvarnished history of his life.

"Yes," mused Aleck, as he slowly descended the stairs which led from the dormitories to the main floor of the academy, "this will just make two dozen thrashings I've had this term. Well, that's better than last, for I had two-score then. I'm improving; I must be careful not to get too good, for the good boys all die young, and I'm not ready for the golden stair act yet. Now, then, brace up, Aleck, old man, the hour is come."

He entered the principal's office.

But to his surprise Professor Sprouts did not greet him with a frown and a command to "Step up here, young man!"

On the contrary the old gentleman's face seemed to fairly beam with benevolent good humor, slightly tinged with melancholy, and he said in a voice so mild and gentle that Aleck slyly pinched himself to make sure that he was not dreaming:

"Ah, Alexander, my dear boy, here you are, eh? I've been waiting for you some time. Engaged at your toilet, I suppose? That's right, my lad, that's right; I always try to inculcate a love of personal neatness in the minds of my pupils, and I have observed that in your case my words have borne good fruit. But sit down, my dear young friend, sit down."

Aleck sank into the same chair in which the family cat was snatching a few moments' repose, to the evident discomfiture of that animal, which leaped to the floor with a wild shriek, and then took her place in a corner to see Aleck receive the thrashing which many years of observation had given her reason to believe must be the inevitable result of his misconduct.

"It is of no consequence, my dear Alexander, of no consequence whatever," said the professor, benignly. "The animal is a nuisance, and ought to have been shot long ago."

The cat uttered a low cry and fell in a fit. As for Aleck, his

eyes bulged out with amazement, and he reseated himself, wondering what was coming next.

"Alexander, my lad," continued Professor Sprouts, "in the midst of life we are in death."

"Now," thought Aleck, "he's working round to the thrashing."

"This world, my dear young friend, is a vale of tears. We are here to-day and gone to-morrow."

"No such luck for me," muttered the boy. "I never expect to get away from here."

"What did you say, Alexander?"

"I didn't speak."

"I thought you did. Alexander, you have always impressed me as being a lad of exceptional self-control. Can you bear a great shock?"

"I guess so. Which are you going to use—the rattan or the rawhide?"

"My dear boy, I do not refer to a physical shock. I have bad news for you."

"What is it? Has Angelo got back?"

"No, no, Alexander. I have received a letter from New York, informing me," and the professor wiped away an imaginary tear, "that your father is no more."

"No more what?" inquired the unmoved Aleck.

"Pshaw!" exclaimed Professor Sprouts, losing his patience, "he is dead! Do you understand that?—dead and buried."

CHAPTER II.

GOOD-BY TO BUSTERVILLE.

The next moment the professor had resumed his air of almost parental solicitude.

"Yes, my dear Alexander," he continued, applying his handkerchief to his eyes, "your father passed away at 9.15 Wednesday morning, as I am informed by the letter I hold in my hand, which is from his lawyer, Mr. Squiggs, who intrusts to me the painful duty of breaking the news to you."

"You seem to be worse broken up than the news is, professor," said Aleck, calmly.

"This is an awful blow," groaned the professor.

"It seems to be quite a breeze," remarked Aleck.

"Alexander, you shock me."

"Try to bear up, professor. Why are you shocked?"

"At the callous indifference with which you receive the news of the death of the author of your existence."

"Well, professor, he always seemed to be ashamed of his authorship."

"Your father was very eccentric."

"I should think so, Professor Sprout. What did I ever do that he should refuse to see me for fifteen years? Was it my fault that my mother manufactured sole-leather pie-crust, and put suspender buckles in the hash? I oughtn't to be expected to burst into a paroxysm of tears on account of the death of a parent who never would have anything to do with me, except to pay your bills and leave a standing order with you to thrash me every time I seemed to be beginning to enjoy life a little."

"Ahem! You express yourself in a peculiar manner, Alexander."

"It's a peculiar case, professor."

"We will not discuss that question. This letter from Mr. Squiggs informs me not only that your father has passed away, but that he has left his entire fortune to you."

"To me!"

"Yes—on certain conditions."

"What are they, professor?"

"That you will learn from this letter," and Professor Sprouts handed Aleck a sealed envelope, at the same time making a desperate attempt to squeeze out a few tears. "It is a message from the dead."

The youth tore open the envelope, unfolded the sheet it contained, and read as follows:

"ALEXANDER:

"Your school life has been a disappointment to me."

"Me, too," commanted Aleck, in parenthesis.

"I am informed by Professor Sprouts that instead of devoting your time to study you spend it in making the lives of those about you a burden by senseless practical jokes. This tendency you inherit from your mother's family, not from mine; no Smart was ever a practical joker. I am proud to say that I have no sense of humor whatever myself. I have asked Professor Sprouts to sternly repress every indication of this weakness in you, and he informs me he has thus far done so conscientiously, but that he almost despairs of being able to entirely eradicate this blemish from your character."

"He also tells me that it is almost impossible to make you study, that you evince no taste for the classics, that you are generally at the

foot of your class. This being the case I have decided to remove you from the Busterville Academy at the close of the present term and put you to work somewhere to find out if you are good for anything at all."

"If you succeed I will set you up in business; if you fail I will disown you."

"But as I may not live until the term is over—for I am under the care of four physicians, and am sinking rapidly under their skillful treatment—I have made a will leaving you my entire property on the following conditions:

"Immediately at the expiration of the present school term you must leave the Busterville Academy, and commence a business career. You must secure a position with some reputable firm. If, at the expiration of one month, your employer is willing to sign a paper stating that your conduct has been in every way satisfactory, and that he believes you to possess genuine business ability, you will receive the fortune."

"To guard against any possible miscarriage of my plans, I shall allow you six months in which to find an employer willing to testify thus, but should this period expire, and the paper still remain unsigned, it will be proof positive of your total unfitness to take charge of a large fortune, and my money will then be used to found an asylum for aged cats."

"I feel satisfied that the severest critic could pick no flaw in my will as it stands, and that the envy of those who have during my lifetime pronounced me 'eccentric' and a 'crank' will be turned to admiration and respect when they learn what wisdom I have displayed in the disposition of my estate."

"Should I die before the school term is ended, this letter will be forwarded to you by my lawyer, Mr. Erasmus Squiggs; but if I live until the expiration of the time, as I fully expect to, you will never see it, but will be notified in another way of my plans regarding your future. This communication is simply a precaution which, with the shrewdness and perspicacity that have characterized me throughout my life, I have decided upon."

"In conclusion, Alexander, let me warn you that any attempt to 'break' this will of mine will be useless. The best legal experts have informed me that any such move would certainly result in failure."

"Your affectionate father,

"ORVILLE SMART."

"P. S.—It was my intention to bestow a handsome legacy upon your preceptor, Professor Sprouts, but he has made such a complete failure of your education, that I have decided to leave him nothing but my regards."

"P. P. S.—Beware of women! If I had never met your mother, I should be able to provide for you much more handsomely."

"O. S."

While Aleck was absorbed in the perusal of the letter, Professor Sprouts' eyes had been fixed upon his face with a pensive, far-away look.

As our hero looked up the old man sighed deeply, and said:

"When your father died a great man passed away, Alexander."

"Yes, sir."

"He impressed me as being a shrewd, far-seeing man, yet, withal, benevolent and kindly."

"Is that so, professor?" inquired Aleck, as in a quiet unostentatious manner, he appropriated half a dozen cigarettes from the package that lay on the desk.

"Yes, Alexander. I scarcely exaggerate, I think, when I say that he was almost a second Lyncurgus."

"A which, professor?"

"A second Lyncurgus. Surely, you are not unfamiliar with that illustrious name?"

"Don't think I ever met him, Professor Sprouts. You know I'm not much acquainted in Busterville."

"Alexander, your ignorance appalls me. For centuries the name of Lyncurgus has been synonymous with integrity, with—er—by the way, Alexander?"

"Yes, sir."

"Is my name mentioned in your father's letter?"

"Yes, it is."

"I suspected as much, my dear Alexander. Your father held me in high esteem. Er—what does he say of me, Alexander?"

And the professor again applied his handkerchief to his eyes, while Aleck pinned a placard bearing the legend "Please Kill Me" on his back.

"Try to calm yourself, professor," suggested the youth.

"It is impossible, Alexander. Strong man though I am, this terrible grief overpowers me. I have lost a friend that can never be replaced."

"Yes, sir. He speaks of his will in the letter, professor."

"Ah, indeed!" and Aleck saw one of the old man's eyes peering eagerly through a hole in the handkerchief.

"Yes, sir. And in that connection he refers to you."

The professor gave a sob that sounded like the dying gasp of an asthmatic mule.

"Spare me, Alexander, spare me."

"Enough, professor; I will put the letter away, and show it to you some time next week when you are able to sit up straight."

"Hold! Alexander!"
 "Yes, sir."
 "I am better now. You may show me the letter."
 "Here it is."
 "Thank you, my boy, thank you! Ah! that familiar handwriting."
 "Going to have another turn, professor?"
 "No, no, Alexander; but this is very, very trying."
 "I find it so, too; but perhaps you'll feel different when you have read the letter."
 The youth watched his companion's face with as much interest as the professor had watched his a few minutes before.
 And it was a study.
 The old man's expression of melancholy approval was quickly transformed into one of rage and indignation.
 "Outrageous! infamous!" he gasped, brokenly.
 "It isn't just the way to treat an only son, is it, professor?"
 "Bah!" howled the old man, "you need not complain! But such an insult to me, *me*, Professor Melville Sprouts—"
 "Why, what's the matter, professor? He leaves you his regards—the regards of a modern Lyncurgus—"
 "Silence! See here, Alexander, the term is not up yet. Your conduct of late has been simply outrageous. Discipline must be maintained, and I will maintain it at any cost."
 The old gentleman suddenly produced a rattan from behind the desk.

"You are going to flog me, professor?"
 "I am," and the professor advanced toward Aleck.
 The youth suddenly put his right foot forward, and, as he anticipated, Professor Sprouts, who was very near-sighted, fell over it, and the next moment lay sprawling on the floor.
 Before he could arise, Aleck had seized his hat and left the room. Thirty seconds later, he had taken his final departure from the Busterville Academy.

CHAPTER III.

ALECK'S FIRST ATTEMPT.

The next morning Aleck presented himself at the office of Mr. Erasmus Squiggs, his late father's lawyer.

The old gentleman, who had the general appearance of an animated corpse in a bad state of repair, received him with a gloomy smile.

"There have been many changes since we last met, Alexander," he said, "many, many changes."

"Yes, sir," responded Aleck, insinuatingly, "but I can't see that you have changed any."

"No," giggled the old man, whom our hero had touched in a weak spot, as the young scoundrel was well aware, "no, Erasmus Squiggs holds his own as well as most of 'em."

"I should say so, Mr. Squiggs; and yet, if I am not mistaken, you must be nearly forty-seven years of age."

"Yes, I am, I am," piped the lawyer, who was nearer seventy, "but no one would suspect it, now would they, Aleck?"

"Certainly not, Mr. Squiggs. If I didn't know you to be older, I should say that you were about thirty-nine."

"Would you indeed, Aleck?"

"Yes, sir."

"Alexander, you are a smart boy. You received your father's last letter, and you know the terms of his will?"

"Yes, sir."

"It was an extraordinary will, but it will be easier for you to accept it than to fight it. All you have to do is to get a position somewhere, hold it a month, get your employer to sign the necessary paper—and there you are!"

"Yes, sir; but how shall I get a position?"

"Very easily, my dear Alexander. In fact, I can offer you one myself."

"You, Mr. Squiggs?"

"Yes. I need a boy, and will take you, if you wish. If you show any liking for the profession I will, at the end of the month, accept you as a student after signing the paper."

"I would like to be a great lawyer, like you, Mr. Squiggs," remarked Aleck, pensively.

"Of course you would. Well, who knows what time may bring forth? Twenty years from now your fame will doubtless rival that of Erasmus Squiggs."

As Mr. Squiggs' fame did not extend more than half a mile from his office in any direction, this was not a very brilliant prophecy. However, Aleck pretended to be enraptured.

"Do you really think so, Mr. Squiggs?"

"Certainly I do. Nothing is impossible to him who is willing to wait patiently—and put up a reasonable amount of cash."

"You make me very happy, Mr. Squiggs. Do you talk like this to every one who comes in?"

"I do; but my advice costs most people big money, while you get it free, on account of my great esteem for your late father."

"You are very liberal, aren't you, Mr. Squiggs?"

"I am nothing if not liberal."

"That's what I thought. Were you born that way, or is it an acquired habit?"

"Eh?"

"Nothing. When shall I come to work?"

"To-morrow morning. But, remember one thing!"

"What is that, Mr. Squiggs?"

"I shall not sign the paper, unless you manifest a decided aptitude for the profession."

"All right, Mr. Squiggs," and the youth departed. The next morning he began work.

It was his intention to repress his propensity for practical joking for the entire month, to conduct himself with propriety, and, as soon as the paper was signed, to bid adieu to the lawyer's office forever.

But, alas! while the spirit was willing, the flesh proved lamentably weak.

Perhaps, if Mr. Squiggs had not combined so many of the characteristics of a mummy with those of a third-rate lawyer, Aleck might have been more successful in carrying out his resolution.

As it was, the old gentleman "wearied" him so by his antediluvian mannerisms, his tedious, though well-meant, advice as to his future, and his numerous eccentricities, that in a very short time the youth began to yearn exceedingly for a change of some kind.

"The academy was better than this," he mused one morning, as he sat alone in the office, trying to interest himself in a volume of Kent that the lawyer had directed him to peruse. "I got a little fun there once in a while, if I did have to take a whaling for it afterward. Here I can't get recreation on any terms. Aha! what have we here?"

This exclamation, uttered *sotto voce*, was called forth by the entrance of an elderly couple attired in the costumes of the time of George III. or thereabouts, and evidently from "Way back."

"Is this here Mr. Squiggs' office?" demanded the old man.

"It is, sir," replied Aleck, scenting fun. "Permit me to offer you and your fascinating lady a couple of chairs."

"Wa-al, yeou seem to be a pooty peart sort of a youngster," remarked the visitor, as he and his companion sank into the chairs which the urbane and smiling Aleck indicated.

"Yes, sir, I have been that way for many years—ever since I had the measles, in fact. What can I do for you?"

"Wa-al, I understand that yeou make a specialty o' divorces here."

"We do, sir," replied Aleck, cheerfully. "We can furnish you with a superior article of divorce in any style of type or binding, and at prices that defy competition."

"I wanter know!"

"You stay here long enough and you will know."

"I don't see no sense nor reason in all this talk," broke in the old woman, sharply. "Is the lawyer in?"

"I am the lawyer," replied Aleck, unblushingly.

"Yeou?"

"Certainly."

"Air yeou Mr. Squiggs?" demanded the old man, peering at the youth through his steel-bowed spectacles.

"Why, didn't you recognize me?" asked Aleck. "I knew you at once. You are Mr. Elnathan Dusenbury, of Windyville Center."

We should inform the reader that he had seen the visitor's name on the valise which stood on the floor beside him.

"Yes, that's my name," said the old man, in surprise, "but it seems ter me that yeou're mighty young fer a lawyer."

"Oh, I am many years older than I look," said Aleck. "But you will excuse me if I ask you to state your business, as I have a great deal to attend to this morning."

"Wa-al, the old woman an' I hev ben a-talkin' the matter over, an' we've 'baout concluded that we want one o' these here divorces."

"Yes, we hev!" added Mrs. Dusenbury, with emphasis.

"Ah, indeed!" said Aleck, pleasantly. "Well, we can give you a very neat article in the way of divorces for 'steen dollars. We have also a few misfit and second-hand divorces at merely nominal prices."

"Hey?"

"Exactly so. What grounds have you for a divorce?"

"Grounds enough!" snorted the old man, fiercely.

"Wa-al, I sh'd say so," added his wife, with equal acerbity.

"Tut, tut, tut!" exclaimed Aleck; "this is very painful—very

painful, indeed. Well, which do you want, a divorce *e pluribus unum*, or a divorce *pro bono publico*?"

"What's the difference?" demanded the venerable hayseed, in bewilderment.

"There are many points of difference. Our divorce *e pluribus unum* comes in different sizes, and is warranted to keep in any climate. Our divorce *pro bono publico* is, however, preferred by many. If you want one of that brand you will have to take gas."

"Wa-al, that beats all!" ejaculated the old woman.

"Haow long'll it take ter git one that'll last?" inquired Mr. Dusenbury.

"Oh, not long. In fact, we have some ready made, but I would advise you to leave your measure and have one constructed expressly for you."

"Leave my measure for a divorce!" gasped the old man.

"Why, I never heerd o' sech a thing!"

"There are many things that you never heard of," said Aleck. "I can see that you are painfully ignorant of legal matters. But time presses. I must know at once what your grounds are."

"He makes me git up in ther mornin' an' light the fires," wailed Mrs. Dusenbury. "I've done it goin' on forty year, an' I've jest made up my mind I won't dew it no longer."

"She won't milk the caows no more," chimed in the old man, "an' t'other day she pritty near put my left eye aout."

"Aha!" interrupted Aleck, "personal violence. You quarrel, then, eh?"

"I sh'd say we did," moaned the farmer.

"An' I kin git the best o' him ev'ry time," added the old woman, with pardonable pride.

"Now you begin to talk business," said Aleck, with animation. "I can get you a divorce easily enough, but I must first see a sample quarrel."

"Hey?"

"I say, my dear Mr. Dusenbury, it will be necessary for me to see a sample quarrel, so that I can determine exactly how strong your grounds for a divorce are."

"You want us to fight right here?"

"Certainly."

"Darned ef I will!" said the old man, uncompromisingly.

"I'll be darned ef you don't?" said his wife.

"I hain't come all the way from Windyville Center fer nothin'. We're a-goin' ter dew jest what the lawyer sez."

And she made a reach for the farmer's flowing locks, and tore out enough to make a good-sized switch.

Then she began scratching and clawing him with the greatest enthusiasm, and gave him all he could do to defend himself.

"Naow yeou see haow 'tis, lawyer," gasped the old man, as his better half got his head under her arm and began vigorously punching it. "Ef I don't git a divorce, then, b'gosh there ain't no law in the land. Say, ain't we fit enough?"

"By no means, Mr. Dusenbury," said Aleck, promptly. "I will let you know when to stop."

Then he leaned back in his chair and abandoned himself to the enjoyment of the scene.

As he told Swipes in a letter that afternoon, it was the best "racket" he had had for months.

But just in the height of the melee the door suddenly opened and Mr. Squiggs, whom Aleck had not expected for hours, stalked in.

As luck would have it, he was just in time to receive in the pit of the stomach, a blow which Mrs. Dusenbury intended for her worser half.

He dropped to the floor, but was up again in a moment, pale with rage.

His unexpected appearance caused a cessation of hostilities.

While Mrs. Dusenbury put up her back hair and straightened out her bonnet, her husband explained matters to Mr. Squiggs.

"Get out of my office!" roared the lawyer to Aleck, when he comprehended the situation.

"Am I discharged?" asked the youth, with a hurt look.

"Are you discharged? I should say so!"

"And you won't sign the paper?"

"Never, never! Will you get out of my sight?"

Both Mr. Squiggs and the farmer made a simultaneous rush for the young reprobate, and gracefully kissing his hand he made a hasty exit.

CHAPTER IV.

THE SKELETON DOCTOR.

Smart Aleck was not discouraged by his failure as a lawyer's clerk.

"There's plenty of time left," he reflected, "and a fellow must have some fun. Squiggs might have signed the paper,

anyhow. Never mind, I'll get even with him when I get hold of the money; I'll take the management of the property out of his hands—that'll break his heart."

He paused to violently ring the door-bell of a residence he chanced to be passing. Then he stood by the curbstone, and when a wild-eyed woman, with flour all over her hands and face came to the door, he said, sympathizingly:

"I have been waiting to tell you, madam, that your bell was agitated by a bold, bad boy, wearing freckles and a check suit."

"Bill Staggers!" shrieked the woman.

"Yes'm, he looked as if that might be his name. I seized him and yelled for the police, but he drew a stiletto, drove it to the hilt in my side, and made his escape."

"You are stabbed?"

"Yes'm; I am undoubtedly seriously injured. I think that my liver has become unloosened from its fastenings. I go to seek aid."

And while the bewildered woman was staring at him, Aleck slid around the corner, a pleasant smile on his face.

"It is little incidents like that that shed sunshine on the pathway of life," he mused. "But what about another job? Oh, well, I'll take a rest for a day or two, and perhaps something will turn up."

Something did turn up.

The following afternoon he received a letter from Professor Sprouts.

"My dear boy," wrote the old man, "I have just received a communication from Mr. Squiggs, in which he informs me that he has been obliged to discharge you on account of a trick which you played on a client of his."

"I regret that this is the case, and fear that Mr. Squiggs has acted hastily. Your love of humor, which was developed at an early age, was, to my mind, one of the most charming characteristics of a lad in whom I always found much to admire."

"Great Scott!" gasped Aleck, "you always did all you could to knock it out of me. What's your game now?"

"Do not despond, my dear Alexander," the letter went on, "you are certain of success, and you will receive every aid from Melville Sprouts that is in his power to render."

"I inclose a letter of introduction to my old and valued friend, Escalapius Capsule, M. D., of New York. He is a physician of considerable repute, and the proprietor of a pharmacy at No. — Third avenue. He will, I have no doubt, give you a position in his store, and will at the expiration of the stipulated time, sign the paper."

"With renewed assurances of esteem I am, my dear Alexander,

"Your attached tutor and friend,

"MELVILLE SPROUTS, A. M."

"Any one would think that the old man was dead stuck on me," mused Aleck, as he lighted a cigarette with the letter. "He's doing his level best to get solid with me. Wants me to get him appointed my guardian when I get the money, I suppose. Well, that's all right, business is business. If I don't get the property, and the money goes to found the hospital for aged cats, I'll see that he's made chaplain of the establishment. Well, I guess I'll go down and see the doctor. May be he and I can come to terms without blows."

Half an hour later Aleck entered the pharmacy of Escalapius Capsule, M.D.

It was a small, dingy establishment on the lower part of Third avenue.

As the youth entered a large, fat, bald-headed man advanced to meet him, demanding brusquely:

"What can I do for you, boy?"

"My name is Alexander Smart," began our hero.

Instantly the old man's air of severity vanished.

"Ah, yes; glad to meet you, my dear young friend," he said, grasping Aleck's hand and shaking it with great violence. "Professor Sprouts has written to me about you. He says that you are a lad of rare intelligence."

"Yes, they used to call me Smart Aleck at the academy," said the youth, with an air of shrinking modesty.

"Smart Aleck! Ha, ha! Very good, indeed. Well, Aleck, the professor thinks that you would possibly like to enter my establishment."

"Yes, doctor."

"Very good, very good, my boy. You know nothing about drugs?"

"No, sir, but I didn't suppose that made much difference in a drug clerk."

"Ha, ha!" giggled Dr. Capsule, who seemed determined to take everything good-naturedly. "That's not bad—not bad at all,

"I see that you have a sense of humor. But you will not be obliged to meddle with drugs."

"No?"

"Oh, no. You can attend to the confectionery and toilet article department. I have employed no clerk at all for several years. It has been my habit to lock up the store when I had occasion to go out. But while you remain with me you can attend to customers—in your department—in my absence, but, of course, you will have nothing to do with the drugs."

"All right, doctor."

"If you manifest a liking for the profession I may possibly be induced to accept you as a student in time."

"Oh, doctor, would not that be nice?" exclaimed Aleck, with pretended enthusiasm.

"Be painstaking and industrious and you may yet be the proprietor of a pharmacy like this."

"I'd rather be the proprietor of a morgue, with a job lot of second hand corpses," grumbled the youth, as, after telling him that he could begin work at once, and that he would find the price marked on everything, Dr. Capsule meandered out. "How am I ever going to have any fun here? I see that if I get that fortune I'll have to earn it. I'm in hard luck, and no mistake."

But Aleck did manage to have a little fun that afternoon, after all.

He sold an old maid a pint of ammonia for extract of new mown hay, and smiled sweetly when, after taking a grown man's sniff of it, fell to the floor gasping for breath.

He helped her up, explaining that the hay crop had been a failure that year, and that most of the extract had soured in consequence.

He seemed so troubled about it that the old lady told him that he was a bright lad, and gave him a quarter before she left.

The youth had several other "rackets," as he termed them, that day, such as giving a green Irishman a large dose of squills in his soda water instead of vanilla sirup, and other tricks of a similar heartless nature, which we refrain from chronicling, and when he returned to his boarding-house that evening, he congratulated himself on the fact that there was a little more "life" in the drug store than he had imagined there would be, after all.

The days passed on, and as Dr. Capsule seemed determined to be pleased with everything he did, Aleck began to look upon the fortune as his already.

The youth had lots of fun, and the old man, as he never happened to be the victim of any of the tricks, winked at everything, and Aleck began to imagine that almost anything would "go" in the drug store.

One morning the doctor came down to the pharmacy in a very bad humor.

"Alexander," he said gruffly, "I have been unexpectedly called out of town, and shall not be back before night. Do you think you can run things to-day?"

"Certainly, Doctor Capsule," warbled Aleck, in his most innocent, child-like manner.

"Not too much funny business, either," growled the old man.

"Funny business!" exclaimed Aleck, with a look of pain.

"Of course not, doctor."

"I have received a note from Mr. Quiver, saying that he would be here this morning for treatment. You'll have to send him away."

"Very good, doctor."

After a few more instructions the physician departed.

We should explain here, that Doctor Capsule had a consultation room in the rear of the store where he received the few patients who were mad enough to place themselves in his charge; and should also state that Mr. Quiver was an extremely nervous old man, who was fond of looking upon the wine when it was red, as well as of a variety of other colors.

He—Quiver—had had two attacks of delirium tremens, and was in constant fear of another.

He used to call at the drug store every week or two and "let the doctor," as Aleck put it, "fill him up with bromides."

It becomes our painful duty to state that as soon as Doctor Capsule had taken his departure, our young friend began to lay his plans to play a trick on the unlucky Mr. Quiver.

He ambled into the back room, took a large human skeleton, belonging to the doctor, out of the closet where it hung, dusted it off, dressed it in a suit of Doctor Capsule's clothes, and seated it in a chair in the back office.

"It looks a blamed sight better than the doctor himself," he mused, as he tied a pair of the old gentleman's spectacles over the skeleton's eye-sockets, "and I'll bet it'll be able to prescribe just as well. Hello, here comes old Quiver!"

He waltzed out into the store just in time to meet Mr. Quiver.

"Ah, Aleck, my boy, how are you?" was the old man's greeting.

"First rate, Mr. Quiver, how are you?"

"Badly."

"Ah! indeed."

"Yes, I'm afraid I'm going to have 'em again."

"I hope not."

"I'm sure of it. Aleck, I saw a pink cat with a green necktie on, sitting by my bedside and winking at me, this morning—saw it as plainly as I see you now."

"Dear me, what an imagination you have, Mr. Quiver."

"Well, never mind that. Is the doctor in?"

"Yes, sir, this way, sir," and Aleck pranced into the office, saying:

"Here is Mr. Quiver, doctor."

Then, changing his tone and imitating the doctor's voice, he added:

"Show him right in, Alexander."

Aleck had exceptional imitative and ventriloquial powers which he had often used for the amusement of the boys at school, and the present imitation was perfect.

Old Mr. Quiver hobbled in.

As his eyes rested upon the skeleton, he yelled:

"Good heavens! what's that?"

"What's what?" inquired Aleck, in pretended surprise.

"That!" and the old man pointed to the skeleton.

"Why, that is Doctor Capsule, of course."

"Yes, sir, it is I," added the youth, taking a position behind the skeleton, and working its jaws with one hand while he imitated Doctor Capsule's voice.

"Well, by gracious!" gasped Quiver, mopping his forehead.

"If this don't beat anything that ever happened to me! Doctor, I could swear that I see a skeleton sitting in your chair."

"A skeleton! I, Doctor Escalapius [Capsule a [skeleton! Do you mean to insult me, Mr. Quiver?" inquired Aleck, in the doctor's voice, while he continued to work the jaws, which rattled and snapped in a way that struck terror to the old man's heart.

"This is awful," gasped the invalid. "No offense, doctor, but nothing like this ever happened to me before. I guess I'll be able to make you look natural after awhile."

"I hope so, Mr. Quiver, I hope so. How are you feeling this morning?"

A couple of the skeleton's teeth fell out and rolled over almost to the feet of the old man, who viewed them with undisguised terror.

"How am I feeling? Worse than I ever did, before in my life."

"I can readily believe it, for you are looking very ill. Ah, Mr. Quiver, why do you not follow my advice and quit drinking?"

"I—I will, doctor, I've made up my mind."

"Does the doctor still look like a skeleton to you, Mr. Quiver?" asked Aleck, innocently.

"Yes, just the same as ever. Oh, this is dreadful!"

"It makes me laugh to think of Doctor Capsule, who weighs two hundred and forty pounds, being taken for a skeleton," remarked the youth.

"Silence!" he immediately added, assuming the doctor's voice.

"Do not jest at a dying man."

"Dying man!" gasped Quiver. "Surely, doctor, you do not mean that?"

"Yes, I do," and the skeleton's jaws rattled ominously.

"You have but a few hours to live unless you take my advice."

"I'll do anything you say, doctor."

"Well, in the first place you must give up the use of alcoholic liquors."

"I will, doctor, I will!"

"Next you must avail yourself of the new somersault cure."

"The what?"

"The somersault cure. It is a recent discovery of a great French physician that there is no cure for your complaint so sure as turning a few double somersaults four or five times a day."

"I never heard of such a thing."

"There is nothing like it, Mr. Quiver."

"But I don't believe I could turn a somersault, doctor."

"Oh, yes, you could. Just try one now."

"I can't, doctor."

"I insist, Mr. Quiver; it is the only thing that will save your life. In five minutes it may be too late."

Half frightened out of what few wits he had by this dreadful statement, the old man, who probably had not turned a somersault for fifty years, got down on his hands and knees.

"Now, then," said the supposed doctor, "make ready! one, two, three!"

The old man made a desperate effort, his heels went up in the

air, and a moment later he came down with a thud which shook the house.

At the same instant Aleck threw the skeleton over on him. Believing that he had been attacked, Mr. Quiver clutched it, and rolled about the floor with it, imagining that he was engaged in a terrific struggle.

But, alas, for Aleck! in the midst of the one-sided conflict Dr. Capsule, who had missed his train, waltzed in.

He was, as we have said, in a particularly bad humor that day. He "took in" the situation at a glance, and started for Aleck with fire in both eyes.

The youth seized his hat and "made" for the door.

"If you ever dare to come within fifteen miles of this pharmacy again," roared the doctor, "I'll have your life. And when you get your fortune, if you ever find any one fool enough to sign that paper, I'll sue you for fifty thousand dollars damages, and——"

But by this time Aleck was out of hearing.

CHAPTER V.

ALECK FOOLS WITH SPIRITS.

On the morning of the second day after the events related in our last chapter, Aleck's landlady brought him up a card upon which he read the name:

"Mrs. Plunger."

"Who the mischief is Mrs. Plunger?" demanded the youth, wondering.

"Why, don't you remember her?" said Mrs. Hashley (this was the name under which the boarding-house engineer was struggling through this vale of tears.)

"No, ma'am, blamed if I do."

"Why," and Mrs. Hashley indulged in a weird, mysterious smile, "she is the lady who dined here yesterday; she is an intimate friend of mine."

Aleck saw by his landlady's manner that something was up.

"What does she want with me?" he asked.

"She wants to see you on very important business."

Aleck's curiosity was aroused.

"I'll go right down," he said, beginning to brush his hair.

Mrs. Hashley lingered.

"Do you know what Mrs. Plunger is?" she asked.

"A female, isn't she?" inquired Aleck.

"Yes; and she is one of the best known spiritual mediums in the city."

"What, one of those people who monkey with ghosts and things?"

"Yes."

"Well, I'll be tickled to death to meet her," and Aleck started for the door.

In the parlor he found an elderly woman, with a form like a lamp-post and a face like a newspaper cut of a Presidential candidate.

"Glad to meet you again, my young friend," she said, with a smile that would have made Aleck recoil in horror if he had not seen it before. "I am here on business."

"So Mrs. Hashley tells me."

"I have heard of the peculiar position in which you are placed by the terms of your father's will."

"Have, eh?"

"Yes, and I think I can help you out."

"How?"

"I will employ you as assistant for the stipulated time, then I will sign the paper stating that your services have been in every way satisfactory, and you can pay me fifty dollars. See?"

"Oh, yes. Well, when is all this to transpire?"

"You can begin as soon as you like."

"What will my duties be?"

Mrs. Plunger moved closer to him, and began to talk into his ear.

"I give three seances a week at my residence, at each of which I employ an assistant. A smart boy is the best kind of an assistant. The youth I have been employing has been taken suddenly ill, and it has occurred to me that you could take his place."

"What would I have to do?"

"Simply conceal yourself in the cabinet before the seance, and during the evening appear as various spirits."

"I see. But I'm too healthy for a spirit."

"Oh, you'll do. Now I have told you an important secret of my profession, and you must promise me never to reveal it."

"Oh, that's all right, Mrs. Plunger. When shall I begin work?"

"To-morrow night. Before that time we will have a rehearsal, and I will show you exactly what you have to do."

Not to linger too long on unimportant details, let us state that the rehearsal was a complete success, and that, after two hours' work, Mrs. Plunger pronounced her new assistant perfect in his "business."

As for Aleck, he saw that there were opportunities for "dead loads" of fun in the affair, but he determined that, if possible, he would curb his propensities in that direction and attend strictly to business, in order to get his employer's signature to the document as soon as possible.

Mrs. Plunger, like many of her "profession," used a "trick" cabinet, in which her assistant could be so effectually concealed, that the most vigilant committee from the audience could not possibly find him.

The first seance passed off with great eclat. Aleck personated the spirits of an Indian maiden, a pirate, and several other highly interesting personages, to the mingled fear and wonder of the assemblage, and received much commendation from Mrs. Plunger for the skill he displayed.

Alas! that we are obliged to chronicle Aleck's fall from grace!

The chances for a "racket" were so great that the youth could not make up his mind to neglect them, after his second performance, and consequently the third seance was a memorable one, as we shall proceed to relate.

Aleck ambled in that evening, looking so much more innocent and child-like than usual, that a momentary suspicion of his intention flashed across the mind of Mrs. Plunger, who had heard of some of his former exploits.

But she quickly dismissed the idea as unworthy of consideration, not believing that her assistant would sacrifice his interests and her business for the sake of a little fun.

She did not know Smart Aleck.

There was quite a large audience, mostly "believers," in Mrs. Plunger's parlor that evening, and, as each one represented fifty cents, the "medium" was in high spirits.

"We must make it interesting for them," she whispered to her assistant, after she had taken her place in the cabinet and the door had been closed.

"We will," he responded, cheerfully.

And they did—at least Aleck did.

"Is the spirit of my sainted Matilda present?" sniffed an elderly man occupying a front seat. "If so, I should be very glad if she would materialize."

"That's old Mr. Muggs," whispered the medium to Aleck; "his wife was about forty years younger than he was, and she said, when she died, that it was a blessed relief. You can make up as her."

About two minutes later Aleck pranced out of the cabinet, arrayed in a long white robe, and wearing a blonde wig.

Waltzing up to Mr. Muggs, he seated himself on the old gentleman's knee, asking:

"How've you been, Muggsey, old man?"

"Why, Matilda, is that you?" piped the widower, nervously.

"Pears to me you're a mighty sight heavier'n you used to be when you were alive."

"I know I am—they feed me better where I'm stopping than you used to."

This created a sensation in the assemblage, and a ripple of laughter was heard.

"Say, how's all the folks, anyhow?" demanded Aleck, toying with the old man's goat-like beard.

"Oh, they're first-rate, Matilda. But how do you like it where you are?"

"Me? Oh, first-rate. I play on a thousand-dollar gold-plated harp, and associate with little tin angels all the time."

There was a murmur of astonishment in the audience, and the old man was evidently discomfited.

"You don't talk much like you used to, Matilda," he said.

"Well, I should say I didn't," admitted Aleck. "Oh, I'm very different from what I used to be. You know how jealous you always were?"

"Well, I s'pose I was."

"I should murmur. Well, you'd be worse now. I've got more beans than you could shake a stick at."

"Well, you're the blamedest spirit I ever saw," gasped Mr. Muggs.

"Oh, what do you know about spirits, anyhow?" laughed Aleck. "But I can't fool away my time with you any longer. Ta, ta!" and the youth galloped off and re-entered the cabinet.

"Don't you ever try that sort of thing again," hissed the medium. "You nearly gave the whole thing away."

"Is that so, Mrs. Plunger?" said Aleck, meekly. "Well, I will be very, very careful in the future."

"Kin yez show me me cousin's spook?" demanded an Irishman in the audience.

"That's Mike Dugan, the contractor," said Mrs. Plunger, in a hoarse whisper. "Fix up as his cousin, and be quick about it."



ALECK SECURING A SITUATION IN A DRUG STORE.—(See Chap. IV.)

In about a minute Aleck stepped out of the cabinet, demanding:

"Pwhere are ye, Mickey?"

"An' is that yersilf, Patsy?" howled Dugan.

"Sure, an' it is."

"An' how do ye loike it pwhere ye are?"

"Not mush, Mickey. Pwhin are ye goin' ter pay me the tin shillin's ye owe me?"

"Sure, I owe ye nothin'!" cried Dugan.

"Ye're a liar!" yelled Aleck.

"I'll allow no man, alive or dead, ter call me that!" bawled the Irishman, as he jumped out of his seat and seized the supposed spirit.

Then followed a scene that baffles description. Aleck and Dugan rolled over together on the floor; the cabinet was upset, and Mrs. Plunger emerged from it, shrieking; and some skeptic in the audience turned up the gas.

Then there was a general cry of "fraud," and seeing that the game was up, and the place might become unpleasantly warm for him if he remained any longer, Aleck tripped up the Irishman and made his escape, leaving Mrs. Plunger to explain matters to her disciples.

It is hardly necessary to state that he never returned.

CHAPTER VI.

ALECK AS A PIANIST.

A few days later Aleck saw an advertisement in a morning paper for a smart boy with some knowledge of music in a downtown music store.

He knew no more about music than a kangaroo knows about base-ball, but he did not let that fact stand in his way, but replied promptly to the advertisement.

At first Mr. Crochet, the proprietor of the store, was not inclined to receive his application favorably, but when he heard about the paper and became aware that he stood in the presence of a prospective millionaire, he smiled sweetly and said:

"Well, I did want a boy who could play the piano a little; but never mind, my other clerk, Mr. Hocus, can show off the pianos, and you can attend to the sheet music and musical goods department."

"All right, Mr. Crochet."

"You can commence work now, if you like. I shall be delighted to sign the paper when the time is up."

"I hope you'll feel that way then," mused Aleck, as he slid behind the counter and began operations by dusting off the stock in trade.

When he had upset a box of violin bridges, made a big dent in a silver-plated cornet, and smashed a five-dollar bust of Wagner, he laid down the duster with a pleased expression of countenance, and—Mr. Crochet having gone out—went into the back room to talk to the other clerk.

He found Hocus a youth after his own heart. He was somewhat older than himself, and as full of "the old Nick" as an egg is of meat.

While they were talking a young lady strolled into the store, and Hocus whispered:

"Get onto her make-up. I'll bet that Solomon in all his glory never owned a hat like that one. She's Crochet's 'mash.'"

"Is that so?"

"Yes. Go and wait on her, and see what you think about letting her live any longer."

So Aleck galloped out into the store and greeted the customer with:

"Delightful morning, is it not?"

"Where's Mr. Crochet?" demanded the girl, arranging her blonde bang before the mirror in the show-case.

"I regret to state," replied Aleck, "that he has been suddenly called away."

"Oh, pshaw!"

"That's just what I said. Singular that we should think just alike."

"You are a bold, saucy boy," snapped the young woman, "and I will report you to Mr. Crochet."

"Oh, please don't!" cried Aleck, in pretended terror, "and I will always be highly respectful to you in the future."

"Well, see that you are. Have you got the song 'Why do Summer Roses Fade?'"

"No, we have not, but we can sell you the answer to it, entitled, 'Because it's their Biz.'"

The girl glared at him a moment and then waltzed out, saying:

"I shall speak to Mr. Crochet about you, boy."

"Crochet is engaged to a girl up on Lexington avenue," said Hocus, when Aleck returned to the back room, "but he is carrying on a flirtation with this freak. She's a music teacher. I wonder what his girl would think if she knew it?"

"Why not send her word? We could have lots of fun with the old man."

"He'd kill us if he found it out."

"How would he ever find it out? We could send her an anonymous note."

"That's so! We could get her to come down here some morning when the music teacher is here; there would be a circus, sure."

"Now you're talking."

"The teacher comes in every morning at about this time, and Crochet is generally on hand."

"Well, let's get up the note now."

They did. When finished, it read as follows:

"MISS HUFFINGTON: Are you aware that the man to whom you are engaged, is carrying on a desperate flirtation with another woman? Go to his store to-morrow morning at 11 o'clock, and be convinced that I am telling you the truth.

A FRIEND."

The communication was at once mailed.

At a few minutes before eleven the next morning, Miss Thumper, as the piano teacher was named, entered the store, and was enthusiastically received by Crochet.

"It seems ages since we have met," he said, with a sentimental glance.

"Now, Mr. Crochet, you stop!" giggled the giddy pianist.

Then they began an animated conversation in low tones, and had just become so absorbed as to be quite unconscious of their surroundings, when Miss Huffington sailed in.

The first intimation of her presence received by Mr. Crochet, was the demand:

"Lemuel Crochet, who is this thing?"

Crochet jumped about three feet in the air, and Miss Thumper demanded:

"Who do you refer to, woman?"

"Don't you call me woman!"

"Ladies, ladies!" expostulated the unlucky Crochet. "I beg—"

But the two women would not listen to him—they had other business of more importance to attend to.

After showering "back-handed" compliments on each other for about five minutes, to the intense delight of Aleck and Hocus, they commenced more serious warfare.

Miss Huffington began operations by seizing her rival's bang in both hands and tearing it off. Miss Thumper retaliated by scratching a map of Long Island on her opponent's face.

But we must not linger on this painful scene.

Crochet at last succeeded in separating the two women, receiving a black eye and a number of scratches himself.

Two cabs were called for, and the rivals shipped for home.

Then Crochet sank into a chair, drew a long breath, and murmured:

"Thus ends my dream of love! Aleck, go out and buy me a yard and a half of court plaster, and a gallon keg of arnica."

The next morning, when Aleck came to business, Hocus greeted him with:

"Say, old man, Crochet suspects that you wrote that note to Miss Huffington."

"Is that so?"

"Yes. He told me he was sure of it, and he said he was going to get even with you by refusing to sign that paper when the time was up."

"He is, eh?"

"That's what he told me."

"That settles it, then. I'm sick of this measly business, anyhow, and I'll have one more good racket, and get out."

"Wish I could afford to do the same thing. What'll your racket be?"

"I don't know—I'll think up something."

"By thunder!" interrupted Hocus, "here comes old man Pettibone again! He's an old jay from 'way off in Connecticut somewhere. He's been in here three times before to buy a piano, but couldn't seem to get suited. Crochet says it's because I didn't know how to show it off."

"Let me show it off this time," suggested Aleck.

"But you can't play."

"An old hayseed like that won't know the difference."

"That's so. Well, have it your own way."

"I'll tell you what to do; tell him I'm Josef Hoffmann, the great boy pianist."

"Shut up! here he comes!"

Old Mr. Pettibone shuffled in.

"Bein' as I was in town agin, I thought I'd look in an' see ef I couldn't find a pianny ter suit me, young man."

"Delighted to see you, Mr. Pettibone," said Hocus. "We have some new and very superior instruments."

"Wa-al, let's look at 'em."

"Fortunately," added Hocus, "the celebrated boy pianist, Josef Hoffmann, is here this morning and perhaps he will exhibit one of the pianos to you. Would you be kind enough to do so, Mr. Hoffmann?"

"Why, certainly," and Aleck waltzed up to one of the instruments, and opened it with a bang. "What'll you have, Mr. Pettibone?"

"Oh, most anything," said the old man. "I ain't no jedger o' music."

"Then I will give you my world-renowned imitation of a thunder storm."

Then the youth took off his cuffs, rolled up his sleeves, and "sailed in."

It was the first time he had ever touched a piano in his life, but that did not make any difference to him.

He pounded with both fists, breaking a string every thirty seconds, and occasionally lifting one of his feet and bringing it down on the keys with startling effect, while Hocus stood by convulsed with laughter, and the old man listened with wide-open mouth.

Finally he concluded with a tremendous discord executed with both hands and one foot.

"Wa-al," said Mr. Pettibone, "that's the darndest piece ever I heerd. By jingo, bub, you're a great player!"

"Oh, yes, I know I am," smiled Aleck. "I could play like that for you all day."

"Well, you won't do any more such playing in my store," said Crochet, who had entered unseen, as, pale with rage, he strode up to the youth and seized him by the ear. "You get out of here as quick as you know how."

And Smart Aleck, to the great surprise of Mr. Pettibone, who had been about to purchase the piano, was unceremoniously "bounced."

However, he had the satisfaction of learning from Hocus a few days later that by his impetuosity Crochet had lost his customer; for when he learned the truth the old man became enraged, and stumped out, vowing that he would never enter the place again.

CHAPTER VII.

HOCUS COMES TO THE RESCUE.

After the music store episode Aleck remained unemployed for a fortnight or more.

One morning he received a call from Harry Hocus, his fellow clerk at Mr. Crochet's, with whom he had kept up an acquaintance.

"Hello, old man," was Hocus' greeting, "got another job yet?"

"Me? No," replied Aleck, sorrowfully. "If things go on in this way I shall never lay hands on that fortune."

"Oh, yes, you will. You'll get the fortune if I have to start a business myself, and hire you as clerk."

"That isn't a bad scheme."

"I'd sign the paper if you left me the use of my limbs, but I'm afraid you wouldn't. You're the greatest fellow I ever saw for putting up jobs."

"Can't help it. I have been that way ever since my earliest infancy."

"Have, eh?"

"Yes. I hid my nursing bottle before I was weaned, because I didn't like the nurse. Then I accused the girl of stealing it, and she was fired."

"That so?"

"Yes; and I was always at some racket at school, as I've told you, and I don't suppose I shall ever get over the habit. But it seems tough that because I'm not a dyspeptic like my father I've got to be disinherited."

"You won't be—don't worry. Why, I came round this morning to tell you about another position I think you can get."

Aleck's expression of gloom vanished.

"Good for you, Hocus. You are a friend in need."

"That's all right."

"When I die I'm going to leave you all my property on condition you never eat, or that you stop breathing, or something of that sort."

"Well, I guess it would be about as easy for me as it is for you to stop having fun."

"You're right. Well, what is the job?"

"I'll tell you. They want an assistant clerk up at the Dandy Hotel. Only I'm afraid the place won't do for you unless you can give up rackets for a time."

"Why?"

"Oh, there are too many opportunities for fun."

"I could try to be careful and not give myself away."

"Well, I suppose that's the best you can do, but I'd advise you to give up practical joking for a while."

"You're a healthy fellow to give that kind of advice."

"I'm speaking for your good. Can't you get along without fun for a while for the sake of the fortune? When you get it you need do nothing but put up jobs the rest of your life if you want to."

"Oh, quit preaching, and tell me about the job."

"Well, as I said, it's the assistant clerk's berth at the Dandy Hotel. The chief clerk, Herbert Softleigh, is a friend of mine."

"Herbert Softleigh! that's a daisy name," commented Aleck.

"Softleigh is a man that you can put up lots of jobs on without getting found out."

"How's that! is he deaf or blind?"

"No, but he's one of those literal fellows who believe everything you tell him."

"He and I will get along then."

"No matter how ridiculous a yarn you tell him, he will swallow it if you only keep a sober face."

"He must make a queer hotel clerk."

"Oh, he's pretty shrewd in his business, though he gets taken in once in a while. I guess you'll get along with him if you don't go too far."

"Well, honest, I'll try to keep straight this time. Much obliged to you, Hocus."

"That's all right. But you must look out for old man Blazer, the proprietor of the place. He's a holy terror, and if he gets after you you want to hold on to your scalp with both hands."



ALECK'S INTRODUCTION TO THE HOTEL CLERK.—(See Chap. VII.)

"Is that so? Why didn't you tell me about him in the first place?"

"Because he isn't round much. You may not see anything of him for a week after you get there. Softleigh attends to most of the business, and the old man only comes and stirs things up occasionally."

"Oh, I guess I'll get along."

"You will if you are a good little boy and do what your kind papa told you in his nice will."

"Shut up."

"Well, come along with me and we'll go up to the hotel and I'll introduce you to Softleigh."

"I'm ready."

"I've told him a little about you, and he is deeply interested in you. He says he thinks you must be a very serious-minded young man."

"I see you've given him a correct description."

"Well, don't you go back on what I've said, if you do I'll never get you another job."

Half an hour later Hocus and Aleck strolled into the Dandy Hotel.

Mr. Softleigh stood at the desk, beaming placidly on all around him.

He was a light complexioned young man with yellow hair, parted exactly in the middle, a large nose, and an expression of great amiability.

He did not wear the heavy mustache or the locomotive headlight which are usually affected by hotel clerks—in fact, he looked much more like a rather serious-minded theological student than what he really was.

"This is my friend, Mr. Smart, of whom I was speaking to you, Mr. Softleigh," said Hocus.

The clerk aroused himself from his reverie, and his mild features assumed a still more amiable expression.

"Ah, yes, yes," he began. "I remember. A very interesting story his. Glad to meet you, my young friend."

"How are you, Mr. Softleigh? Yes, the story of my life is a sad one."

Seeing that he was about to commence a yarn, Hocus stood on Aleck's toes, but the youth paid no attention.

"My father was a Caribbean pirate," went on our hero, recklessly.

"Ah, indeed?" gasped the astonished Softleigh.

"Yes, sir. He was born with a thirst for gore. Before he was four years of age he had slain eleven of his playmates."

"Dear me!" cried Softleigh.

"Shut up!" hissed Hocus in his ear.

"Yes," went on Aleck, heedless of his companion's warning, "he grew up bold and bad. He was known as Red Handed Carlos, the Terror of the Caribbean."

"My gracious! Was he a Spaniard?"

"Oh, no, he came from Hohokus, N. J. When he grew old he reformed, gave up the *nom de plume* of Carlos, and became a boss church member."

"Dear me! what a romantic career!" exclaimed Softleigh.

"Yes, indeed. My par had twenty-four wives. They all—"

"Well, you can tell Mr. Softleigh all about that some other time," interrupted Hocus, with a significant glance at the youth.

"We are here on business, you know."

"That is so," said Softleigh. "Besides, these family details must be very painful for you to dwell upon, Mr. Smart."

"Oh, yes, they are. Why, my par was once a highwayman. He used to stop people in the middle of the road and demand their money. He made most of his fortune that way."

"Is it possible?" cried Softleigh. "I can understand now why he made such a peculiar will."

"Of course you can."

"He was evidently a very eccentric man."

"I should say he was. Why, eccentric was no name for it. He always ate raw meat and drank blood when he was a pirate, for fear he would become too lamb-like and gentle, and when he became good, in his old age, the change did not agree with him. It was what killed him, in fact."

"Oh, give us a rest!" whispered Hocus, nervously. "Say, Mr. Softleigh," he added, aloud, "do you think you can give my friend a chance here?"

"Oh, yes, I think so," said Softleigh, half dubiously, "that is, if none of his relatives would come round. You see—"

"Oh," interrupted Aleck, "you needn't worry about them. None of my relatives are in the pirate business now. They are, most of them, Sunday-school teachers of the deepest dye. In fact, I am the teacher of a large and flourishing class myself, and should insist upon having Sunday afternoon off, so that I could teach their youthful ideas how to shoot."

"Oh, that could be easily arranged," said Mr. Softleigh.

"Though not a church member myself, I respect the religion of others."

He then proceeded to ask Aleck a number of questions, which the youth answered in a satisfactory manner, and the end of the matter was that he was engaged as assistant clerk of the Dandy Hotel, with the understanding that, if all went well, the paper was to be signed at the stipulated time.

As the reader who has faithfully followed our narrative is aware, Mr. Softleigh had undertaken a larger contract than he imagined.

CHAPTER VIII.

ALECK MAKES A BET.

For a few days all went well.

Mr. Softleigh was easy to please, and Mr. Blazer did not put in an appearance.

Aleck played no tricks for some days, although he entertained the clerk with a large assortment of "fairy tales," to all of which Mr. Softleigh listened in open-mouthed amazement.

"That fellow would believe anything," said the youth, in a tone of disgust to Hocus, who called a few days after his installation to see how he was getting along. "I'm getting tired of telling him yarns because he never contradicts me no matter what I say. I'm spoiling to put up a job on some one."

"Don't," said Hocus, "or you'll ruin your chances for getting the cash. You see old Blazer has got to sign the paper, he being your employer, and he won't tolerate any kind of funny business."

"If it were Softleigh, I could get along well enough."

"Well, it isn't Softleigh, and that makes all the difference. Say, Aleck?"

"What?"

"How do you like the biz, anyhow?"

"Pretty well, but I am under an awful strain, old man."

"How?"

"Having to hold in so and not have fun."

"Are there many temptations?"

"Temptations! I should say so."

"I thought there would be."

"Say, Hocus!"

"Well?"

"Are you interested in temperance?"

"Well, I don't lie awake nights worrying about it."

"Neither do I, but there's a man in this house who does."

"Who's that?"

"Did you ever hear of Plum Duff, the great temperance lecturer?"

"Oh, yes."

"Well, he boards here."

"Is that so? What sort of a fellow is he?"

"Meanest cuss I ever struck. Why, he's so riled on temperance that he refused to speak to one of our guests yesterday because he owned a cotton-gin factory."

"Come off!"

"I'm giving it to you straight. And he wouldn't go to his brother's funeral last week."

"Why?"

"Because they had the body laid on a bier."

"Is that so? I suppose he's the same fellow that wouldn't use an umbrella because it had a stick in it."

"Yes, he is. But, joking aside, he is an awful mean chap. He wanted us to knock something off his board-bill last week, because he always left his pie crusts on his plate."

"Great Scott!"

"Oh, he's a terror. And that Awful Example of his is just as bad in his way."

"That what?"

"The Awful Example. Didn't you know that Mr. Duff supports an Awful Example who travels with him?"

"No; what is it?"

"Oh, it's a man, or it passes for one, and looks something like one. It's name is Patsy Haggerty."

"An Irishman?"

"What did you think he was—a Frenchman? Duff picked him up somewhere in a state of intoxication, sobered him, made him sign the pledge, and gave him a job as valet during the day, and Example at night, when he lectures."

"What does he do with him at the lectures?"

"Oh, he stands him up on the platform, and points him out as a proof of the awful effects of whisky drinking."

"Does he look so very bad?"

"Does he? He looks as though he'd been struck by a cyclone, run through a saw-mill, and interviewed by a female book agent, all on the same day."

"He must be a pretty tough specimen."
"He is. If I thought whisky drinking would ever make me look like him, I'd swear off forever. But I guess he was born that way."
"Is he as mean as Plum Duff?"
"No; his peculiarity is his appetite. He can eat more than any four men in the hotel. Why, yesterday he went through the whole dinner bill, and then wanted more. We're losing money on him. Now, to get back to where I began, Duff is the greatest temptation there is for me in this house."
"How?"
"Oh, I'm just growing thin, I want to put up a job on him so much."
"You'd better not."
"I want to get him drunk."
"Plum Duff, the great temperance lecturer, drunk! You couldn't do it."
"Yes, I could, if I had a fair chance."
"Nonsense!"
"I'll bet you five dollars I can."
"Done!"
"That settles it. You'll see that I'll do just what I have said, within a very few days."
"Yes, you will," said Hocus, scoffingly. "But," he added, more seriously, "you'd better give up the scheme, old man—you'll get bounced, if you don't."
"Don't you fret," laughed Aleck, and he deftly changed the subject.
Our hero was "on his mettle" now, and determined to "do or die."
He had a speaking acquaintance with Mr. Plum Duff, who called at the office three or four times a day, to make some complaint or other, and the next time he saw him coming he called out:
"Good-morning, Mr. Duff."
"Good-morning, young man," responded the apostle, stiffly.
"How I wish I could attend your lecture to-night," continued the youth, insinuatingly.
"Do you, indeed?"
"Certainly I do."
"Are you interested in temperance?"
"Of course. I am in favor of putting down whisky—putting it down where it will do the most good to the square inch," he added, beneath his breath.
"I am pleased to hear it. It is seldom that one hears such sentiments from the mouth of a hotel clerk."
"Yes, Mr. Duff, hotel clerks are usually bold and sinful, but I am not one of that kind."
"So I see."
"Of course you do. I wish I could have a long talk with you about temperance and things. You might induce me to sign the pledge."
"What, have you never signed it?"
"Never."
"You should do so at once. Look at the ravages made by the demon, Intemperance, in our midst; look——"
"Yes, that's so—I've often noticed it. Another thing I want to talk to you about is lecturing."
"Lecturing?"
"Yes. I used to be a lecturer myself."
"You?"
"Oh, yes."
"You seem very young for a lecturer?"
"Yes, I know it, but I delivered the boss lecture all the same."
"What was your subject?"
"Mesmerism."
"Why, what do you know about mesmerism?" said Duff, half sneeringly.
"What don't I know about it? Didn't you ever hear of Alexander Smart, the great Boy Mesmerist?"
"No."
"I am surprised. Well, that was my title. Why, I can mesmerize anything, from a tape-worm to a wooden cigar Indian."
"I should not have thought it."
"I know you wouldn't. I've had some very singular lecturing experiences."
"I suppose so. We ought to compare notes. I have lectured all over the world."
"What on?"
"Temperance, of course."
"I lecture on a platform. Well, suppose we do compare notes. I might come up to your room and have a talk some time."
"I wish you would," said Duff, who was always ready to

"sponge" anything, from an idea to a week's board. "When can you come?"
"Most any time."
"How would this afternoon suit you?"
"First-rate."
"I'll expect you."
"Let's see. You lecture to-night at eight, don't you?"
"I do."
"I'll call up at your room at half-past six."
"Very good. I'll introduce you to my awful example, Patrick Haggerty. He will give you some of his experiences, and show you the folly of looking upon the wine when it is red."
"That will be very nice, Mr. Duff. And I will give you an exhibition of my wonderful mesmeric power."
"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Duff; "you couldn't mesmerize me."
"Oh, yes, I could."
"Oh, no, you couldn't."
"I'll bet you five dollars you can't."
"I don't want to rob you of your money."
"That's all right—don't you worry about me, young man. Do you take the bet?"
"Yes."
"Good. I'll look for you at 6:30."
"I'll be there."
He was. At the appointed hour he ambled cheerfully into the lecturer's room, and never had his young face looked more innocent and cherubic.
No one not knowing him would have imagined that Aleck had on hand a "job" of large dimensions.
"Let me introduce my Awful Example. Patrick Haggerty, Mr. Smart," said Duff, leading forward an Irishman with a face like a chimpanzee.
"Oi'm plazed ter mate yez," said Haggerty, working Aleck's arm as if it had been a pump-handle.
"Well, you seem to be," said the youth, wrenching away his hand and straightening out his fingers to see if they were all there.
"My loife has been a sad one, me frind," began the Irishman, who was kept on a salary to relate his experiences, and was always ready for business. "At the age o' foive Oi acquired a taste fer whisky, so I did, an'——"
"Just so," interrupted Aleck. "You can tell me all about it some day when I haven't so much time on my hands. How's everything, Mr. Duff?"
"Flourishing, my young friend. The great cause of temperance goes on with irresistible force and ever increasing impetus, and the day is not far distant when every drop of alcoholic liquor will have disappeared from the land."
"When is all this going to happen?"
"Ere long, my boy, ere long," said the lecturer, vaguely.
"But," he added, "I believe you were to make an experiment here this evening."
"An experiment?" said Aleck, with a puzzled look.
"Yes; you were to attempt to mesmerize me."
"Ah, yes, I had quite forgotten," returned the youth—who had been thinking of nothing else all day—"but I fear you will be a tough subject, Mr. Duff."
"I imagine so," said the lecturer, with a complacent smile.

CHAPTER IX.

ALECK AS A MESMERIST.

"However," went on the youth, "I have not yet met the man I could not mesmerize."
"You have met him to-day, my young friend," smiled Duff.
"Think so?"
"I know so. I have an immense will."
"So I see."
"Pwhat is this yees do be talkin' about?" inquired Haggerty, with a puzzled look.
Aleck explained.
"Sure," said the Irishman, "it's the devil's own business, so it is. Sure, I niver heard o' the like of it in me loife."
"There are many things that you never heard of, Patrick," said Duff, with an air of condescension. "I have no doubt that our young friend could mesmerize you easily enough——"
"Indade an' he c'udn't."
"But with a man of my caliber he will have a much more difficult task."
"Well, gentlemen," interrupted Aleck, "I would like to propose an experiment."
"Proceed, young man," said Duff.
"I will ring for a pitcher of ice-water—your favorite beverage."
"Yes."

"I will then put you in the mesmeric state, so that you will imagine when drinking the water that it is gin."

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Duff. "That will be an utter impossibility."

"Av coorse it will," added Haggerty.

"We shall see," returned Aleck, touching the electric button.

When the hall boy came he said:

"Bring a pitcher of ice-water, Adolphus."

"Yes, sah," and the darkey vanished, with a large and comprehensive smile.

Aleck had neglected to inform Mr. Duff that he had previously bribed the boy to bring a pitcher of gin, but such was the case.

In a few minutes the Ethiopian returned with the gin.

"Now, gentlemen," said Aleck, "we shall see who possesses the most will power, you or I. Mr. Duff, look me steadily in the eyes."

"All right."

The youth made a few passes in front of the lecturer's face. Then he said:

"Now, Mr. Duff, take a drink of water and tell me if it does not taste like pure Holland gin."

"By jove," exclaimed Duff, when he had swallowed half a tumbler of the liquor, "this is most extraordinary!"

"Does it taste like gin?"

"Precisely," replied Duff, pouring out another glassful and gulping it down. "Boy, you possess wonderful powers."

"Of course I do," admitted Aleck.

"Sure, ye moight try the expiramint on me too," suggested Haggerty, with a thirsty look.

"Why, certainly, Mr. Haggerty," and he waved his hand in front of the Irishman's face. "You are quite an easy subject, I perceive."

"Is that so?"

"Yes. Now taste the water and see what you think of it."

Haggerty did so.

"This bates anthing evir I see," was his enthusiastic comment. "Sure av I didn't know it was wather I'd swear it was gin."

"Of course you would."

"This remoids me o' the toimes before I soigned the pledge, so it does."

"Well, help yourselves, gentlemen," said Aleck, hospitably, "there's plenty more where that came from."

By this time Duff was beginning to show the effects of his liberal potations.

His eyes were assuming a glassy stare, and the hand with which he poured out his third tumblerful of the beverage was somewhat unsteady.

"When I think," he said, "of the money yearly spent in this country for the accursed stuff which I imagine I am drinking my blood boils."

"Indade, an' so does moine," added Haggerty, re-filling his glass.

"Mine, too," chimed in Aleck, with a pleasant smile. "Well, gentlemen," he inquired, "do you acknowledge my power?"

"Yes, my young friend," said Duff, with a slight hiccough. "You have won the bet, and here is your money."

"Thank you, sir."

"Plaze kape me undher the inflooeence the rist o' the wake," pleaded Haggerty. "Sure, what's the use o' dhrinking liquor phin ye kin get such an iligent jag wid wather."

Duff rose to his feet, steadying himself by grasping the back of his chair.

"That man, Haggerty," he said, with what was intended to be a very severe look, "is intoxicated, and (hic) I can prove it. Intoxicated on water! Hag-(hic)-Haggerty I b-blush for you."

"Don't throuble yerself, Misther Duff," responded Haggerty. "I kin do me own blushin'."

"Well, gentlemen," interposed Aleck, "as you have drunk all the water, had you not better be getting ready for the lecture?"

"Yes, yes," exclaimed Duff, staggering about the room in search of his hat. "I had forgotten all (hic) about the lecture. I sh'pose the carriage is at the door. Come on, Patrick."

"I will accompany you," said Aleck, "for I am very anxious to hear one of your great lectures."

"Glad to have you, glad to have you, young man."

The lecturer and his Example got down stairs with some difficulty, and tumbled into their carriage, followed by Aleck.

When they reached the hall where the lecture was to be given the gin had done its work, and both were almost too much intoxicated to stand straight.

And we regret to state that the unprincipled Aleck, instead of being horrified at what he had done, surveyed his two victims

with a pleasant smile as they staggered out of the carriage and into the stage entrance.

It was already late, and a large audience was in attendance.

"We've been expecting you for the last fifteen minutes, Mr. Duff," said a gentleman whom they found awaiting them in the ante-room, "and the audience are becoming impatient. I am to introduce you. Shall we go on at once?"

Duff responded with a tipsy nod, and stumbled on to the platform, followed by Haggerty.

Both seated themselves at the rear of the platform while the introductory speech was made.

It was a rather long speech, and before it was over Duff was fast asleep.

Haggerty was obliged to shake him violently to awaken him. He opened his eyes at last, gazed around him with a dazed expression, then sprang to his feet and made a plunge to the front of the platform, which he succeeded in reaching safely.

Clinging to the reading-desk, he began his lecture.

But it is not our purpose to give a verbatim report of that extraordinary discourse.

He had been speaking some minutes before his disciples in the audience perceived what was the matter with him. When at last they realized the awful truth, they sat in stony horror, awaiting the end, which soon came.

Presently, Mr. Duff began to talk about Haggerty, and to make the usual uncomplimentary allusions to the past life of that gentleman.

He had not gone far, when, to the astonishment of every one, the Irishman sprang up, howling:

"Ye're a liar! I'm as good a man as you are anny day!"

Then he gave his employer a blow "straight from the shoulder," and the next moment the two men were rolling on the platform together, engaged in a desperate combat.

They were separated, but not until they had done each other considerable damage, and, as may be imagined, this brought the lecture to an end.

However, the audience as they filed out were heard to express their opinion that they had had their money's worth.

Hocus, who was, of course, in the house, came up and paid Aleck the five dollars, stating that he had not had so much fun since he had the hooping-cough.

The next day Mr. Duff, who had begun to suspect that a trick had been played on him, took Aleck to task, but the youth seemed so much hurt by his suspicions, that he withdrew his accusations, and believes to this day that he was under the mesmeric influences that evening.

CHAPTER X.

SOFTLEIGH'S LOVE AFFAIR.

"It was a very singular and unfortunate affair, that of Mr. Duff's last evening," said Softleigh to Aleck the day after the lecture. "It seems to me that there must have been a trick somewhere."

"Surely, Mr. Softleigh," said the youth, with a look of offended dignity, "you cannot suspect me."

"Oh, of course not," the credulous Softleigh hastened to assure him. "Undoubtedly you mesmerized him, or thought you did, but I have reason to believe that he and Haggerty were really intoxicated."

"Oh, impossible!" gasped Aleck, in pretended horror.

"I fear that it is so. It is whispered among the hall-boys, I find, that the bartender filled the pitcher with gin instead of ice water."

"Oh he would not, could not be so base!" cried Aleck.

"Let us hope that it is not so," said Softleigh. "I can't help feeling sorry for Duff, anyhow. But pshaw!" he added, with a sigh, "why should I bother my head about other people's troubles, when I have so many of my own?"

"You, Mr. Softleigh!" cried the youth. "I did not suppose you had any troubles."

"Oh, yes I have, Aleck," moaned the clerk, "although I am obliged to hide them 'neath a smiling exterior."

"Why, what seems to be the matter, Mr. Softleigh—corns?" asked Aleck, anxiously.

"Corns! no!" exclaimed Softleigh, with some show of indignation. "Aleck, I love and I am beloved."

"That's bad," commented Aleck, with a sympathetic air.

"Listen," frowned Softleigh. "Her father has forbidden me the house."

"Well, what do you want with the house, anyway? Let him keep his blamed old house."

"You do not understand me, Aleck. He does not favor my suit."

"Why don't you buy a new one, then?"

"Aleck, you are strangely obtuse."
"Then I must have caught it since I came here. I'll see a doctor about it."
"Nonsense! Aleck, in plain English, the old man doesn't like me, and won't let me visit his daughter, and I have to meet her whenever and wherever I can."
"That is rough, Mr. Softleigh. So that is what has been worrying you lately?"
"Yes."
"Is there anything I can do for you?"
"Yes, Aleck, there is."
"What is it?"
"Well, I would like you to take a note to the young lady."
"Why, certainly, with great pleasure," said Aleck.
"You are very good, Aleck. I have to be cautious in my selection of a messenger, and I feel that I can trust you."
"Of course you can. You can trust me as long as you like, and I will pay you whenever I get the chink."
"Don't jest, Aleck."
"Jest as you say."
"Here is a note for Miss Van Cash, in which I make an appointment to meet her this evening."
"What will the old man say?"
"He won't know anything about it."
"Won't, eh?"
"Certainly not. I would like you to deliver the note to the young lady in propria persona."
"Is that in this State?"
"Aleck, you are more ignorant than I supposed you to be. Can you, or can you not, see that Miss Van Cash receives this letter safely?"
"Of course I can."
"Will you, then?"
"Cert."
"Then take it at once."
Aleck seized the note and his hat, and waltzed out.
We are deeply pained to be forced to state that he had no intention of honestly fulfilling the mission confided to him if he could help it.
He had had no fun for nearly twelve hours, and was all ready for another dose.
Ten minutes' walk brought him to the residence of Mr. Van Cash, the banker, on Lexington avenue, who was the father of Softleigh's intended.
As he ascended the front steps, note in hand, the door opened, and a portly old man, whom he recognized as Mr. Van Cash, appeared.
"What have you got there, boy?" he inquired, gruffly, fixing his eyes suspiciously on the note.
"Oh, I'm afraid to tell, I'm afraid to tell!" wailed Aleck, pretending to be dreadfully alarmed.
The old man made a reach for the note and seized it.
"Miss Van Cash!—that puppy Softleigh's handwriting!" he exclaimed. Then he added, fiercely: "See here, boy!"
"Y-y-y-yes, sir," stammered Aleck, apparently shaking from head to foot with fright.
"Did Softleigh give you this note?" demanded the banker, rapidly scanning its contents.
"Y-y-y-yes, sir."
"He says he'll meet her at the corner of Lexington avenue and Seventy-second street. He will, eh? Boy!"
"Y-y-yes, Mr. Van C-c-c-cash?"
"Let him believe that you delivered this note to my daughter. Don't say a word about having seen me."
"All right, sir."
"Now go. Say that you met me, and I'll make you sorry for it as long as you live."
"Oh, dear, what a bad, bold old man you are, and how much afraid of you I am!" soliloquized Aleck, beneath his breath as he slid around the corner. "If I were to stick a pin in you, you'd blow up. Never mind, I won't give you away, but I'll be on hand to see the fun to-morrow evening."
When Softleigh asked him if he had delivered the note, he replied, quite truthfully:
"I am pleased to say that I have."
Poor Softleigh, whose child-like faith in Aleck ought to have melted the obdurate heart of the youth, but didn't, asked no more questions.
At eight o'clock that evening, which was the hour when he and Aleck both "quit work," and the night clerk came on, Softleigh, his hair neatly brushed, and a violet in his lapel, started for the trysting-place.
He looked as innocent and harmless as a babe, but Aleck only surveyed him with ghoulish glee, as he followed him at a safe distance, wondering whether Mr. Van Cash would kill him outright, or only maim him for life.

Softleigh ambled along up Lexington avenue, a smile of pleasant anticipation on his infantile features, until he reached the corner of Seventy-second street.

Then he paused, adjusted his eye-glasses, and gazed anxiously round him.

The girl, oh, where was she?

She was two miles off, destroying caramels in blissful ignorance of her lover's danger, but her stern parent was near at hand.

Softleigh felt a touch on his shoulder.

The bright, sunny smile with which he turned faded quickly away as he found himself confronted by Mr. Van Cash, who, as he was aware, had sworn a large, robust oath to wipe him off the face of the earth at the first convenient opportunity.

"So I've got you at last, have I?" howled the old man, as he produced a stout, healthy looking rawhide from beneath his toga.

Softleigh did not wait to reply. He was evidently not in a mood for repartee. He simply gathered up his skirts, so to speak, and fled with a wild abandon which brought infinite delight to the heart of Smart Aleck, who stood near by, judging from the wide, brilliant smile on that youth's countenance.

Up Lexington avenue fled Softleigh, and he might have escaped, had it not been for the fact that he was a "crank" on the subject of heart disease. His mother's father-in-law's second cousin's step-aunt, or some other equally near and dear relative, had died of the complaint, and Softleigh had always been in mortal terror of sharing her fate. So he was afraid to run too fast, and, in consequence, Mr. Van Cash soon overtook him, and began energetically plying his whip.

But why linger upon that painful scene? Why describe how Mr. Softleigh at last succeeded in tripping up his opponent, wresting the whip from him, and in his turn using the weapon with telling effect? Why relate how a guardian of the peace finally appeared upon the battle-field, and marched both contestants to a dungeon cell, while Aleck followed at a short distance, wreathed in smiles?

Let us rather turn to happier scenes.

CHAPTER XI.

ALECK IN DESPAIR.

"Did you have a pleasant meeting with Miss Van Cash?" inquired Aleck when Softleigh entered the office at about eleven o'clock the next morning.

"Pleasant meeting!" snapped the clerk, in a more savage tone than his assistant had ever heard him use before. "I should say I did! I met the old man, spent a night in a police station, and have just paid a fine of ten dollars."

"Oh, heavens!" groaned Aleck, an expression of agony on his face, "can this be true? Give me the particulars, Mr. Softleigh."

"Blame the particulars!" growled the clerk.

"Somebody put up a job on me, and I'd give five hundred dollars to know who did it."

"Well, I wish I could tell you," said the sympathetic Aleck. "I will make inquiries if you want me to."

"You needn't bother," said Softleigh. "The engagement's off, and that's all there is about it. Blame the luck, anyhow!"

"That's what I say."

"Oh, what do you know about it? Say, look here, Aleck."

"I'm looking, Mr. Softleigh."

"I see by the papers that a notorious hotel beat from the Pacific coast is in this part of the country, and has been 'playing' several prominent hotels. He is described as about sixty years of age, stout, bald-headed, and florid. Look out for him."

"I will, Mr. Softleigh."

"If he shows up here have him fired out in double-quick time if I am not here."

"Yes, sir."

"I've got a few little matters of business to attend to, and then I'm going home, for I'm badly broken up after last night's experience. You can run the house without me, can't you?"

"Certainly, Mr. Softleigh."

About half an hour later the clerk started for home, leaving Aleck monarch of all he surveyed.

This just suited the youth, who paraded around, assigned rooms to country guests, "bossed" the hall boys, and had a good time generally.

He was greatly pleased with his experience at the hotel, and believed that he had at last found a place where he could have all the fun he wanted to without having objections interposed by any one.

At about four o'clock in the afternoon an old man strolled in, paraded up to the desk and inquired:

"Well, young man, how's everything?"

"Stout, bald-headed, florid, and about sixty!" meditated Aleck. "This is the beat!"

"Everything was all right up to the time you arrived," he replied airily.

The new arrival frowned.

"What do you mean, boy?" he demanded, fiercely.

"Well, if you don't understand English," replied the unruffled Aleck, "you ought to bring a translator along."

"Where is the clerk?" howled the old man.

"You're looking at him."

"What?"

"I am the clerk."

"You are, eh?" sneered the old fellow.

"Yes, I am, and I'm onto you like a ton weight."

"You are, are you? Why, confound you——"

"That'll do—I know you."

"I should hope you did. Well, if you know me what do you mean by this insolence?"

"Now, see here, old man," said Aleck, loftily, "I haven't got any time to fool with you. You're just from the Pacific coast, aren't you?"

"Yes, I am, and——"

"I thought so. Well, we haven't got any room here for you, so get out."

"You young——"

"That'll do. Skip!"

"Upon my word——"

"Say, will you go, or shall I have you bounced?"

"Young man, my name is——"

"I don't care what your blooming name is. You won't go, eh? All right. Dennis!" calling one of the porters, a new man who had been engaged on the previous day, and had shown considerable anxiety to distinguish himself.

"Yes, sorr," and the Irishman eagerly plunged forward.

"You see that old man?"

"I do, sorr."

"Run him out."

"Yes, sorr."

And despite the old fellow's desperate resistance, the muscular Milesian seized him in a vise-like grip, and started him for the door at the rate of about a mile a minute.

A few seconds later the unwelcome guest lay in the gutter, while a passing car-horse was gently meandering over his silk hat and fifteen dollar umbrella.

While Aleck stood at the entrance complacently surveying the scene, Softleigh appeared.

"What's the trouble, Aleck?" he inquired.

"Oh, nothing, only I've just had Dennis fire out that hotel beat. He didn't get any week's board out of this house. See, there he is picking himself out of the gutter. He don't know what hit him yet."

"Hotel beat!" gasped Softleigh, with an expression of the utmost horror. "Why, good heavens, that's Mr. Blazer, who has been out of town for some weeks."

He hurried forward and gave his employer his arm.

"Is that cub the fellow you wrote me you had engaged as assistant?" demanded the old man, whose face was purple with rage. "Is he the one who wants me to sign the paper stating that he is in every way satisfactory?"

"Yes, sir," warbled Softleigh, "but——"

"Not another word!" stormed Blazer. "Boy," addressing Aleck, "get out of my sight before I kill you. Don't let me ever see you here again. Sign that paper! I'll see you in Jupiter first. Git!"

"It's no use," mused Aleck, as he sadly wandered away; "if it's a question of cash or fun, I'm afraid I shall have to let the money go. Besides, luck is against me. I'll think no more about the fortune."

However, he soon changed his mind, as it will be our agreeable duty to relate in a future work entitled, "SMART ALECK'S SUCCESS."

[THE END.]

Under the Gulf;

OR,

THE STRANGE VOYAGE OF THE TORPEDO BOAT.

By HARRY ST. GEORGE.

CHAPTER I.

THE WONDERFUL TORPEDO BOAT.

By trade I have been a submarine diver.

Though still a young man, I have had splendid opportunities to practice this peculiar and fascinating business in many places.

As a boy, I began diving in the pearl-fisheries of Lower California, and met with a number of adventures with sharks in the Pacific.

In the fall of 1886 I received a telegram, calling me to New Orleans.

"All is ready—we await your coming."

The words were few, but they ushered in the most remarkable events of my life.

Correspondence had passed between a party and myself with reference to the strange subject, and I was not at all in ignorance of what was meant by the words of the dispatch, "all is ready."

In an hour I boarded a train, taking along with me my diver suit and a number of little things that I believed would be useful.

Reaching New Orleans on November 17, at a quarter past three, I rode direct to the St. Charles Hotel.

I scanned the register.

"Philip Schuyler, room 23."

That was the name I sought.

"Is Mr. Schuyler in?" I asked the clerk.

He referred to the key-rack.

"I believe so."

"Will you send up my name?"

"Here are cards—write."

I did so, simply putting my name:

"John Ainsworth."

Presently the call-boy returned and beckoned.

In a few minutes I was at room 23.

I knocked.

"Come in," said a cheery voice.

As I opened the door and passed in I found myself in the presence of three young fellows.

They were hardly more than boys, but their faces were the brightest I ever laid eyes on.

One had a look of intense knowledge stamped upon his noble brow; he was far older than his years.

This was Philip Schuyler, the inventor.

He introduced me to the others.

The one with raven-black hair, and quick, searching glances, was Andrew Bates.

He was an electrician, and had studied under a venerable professor, who, dying, had cast his mantle upon Andrew, leaving him the wonderful results of years of toil and study.

The third one of the party was a quiet young fellow, with marks of care upon his face.

His name was Aleck Huggins.

As I came to know him better I found that he had a strange history, and had mapped out a life-work that would have appalled most boys.

He was the capitalist of the group, having command of apparently unlimited means.

This was the singular trio who were to be my companions upon the most remarkable voyage ever undertaken—a voyage that would reveal the wonders lying at the bottom of the sea, and open the secrets of those depths that had lain hidden for years.

I liked their looks.

They were deep thinkers, far beyond their years, and instead of feeling their senior by some years, as was actually the case, I was bound to look up to them because of their superior knowledge.

Upon the table around which they sat were various papers, charts, plans, and schedules.

"Welcome, John Ainsworth," said Schuyler, as he sprang forward and grasped my hand.

Soon I was enjoying their conversation.

It filled me with wonder.

Their daring was without bounds, and only equaled by their enthusiasm.

Judging from their confident talk, they had the results of a century's discoveries at their command, to carry out their scheme.

With the wonderful inventions of the last decade, who would pronounce even the wildest scheme impracticable in these days of marvels?

I could see that while Schuyler and Bates were governed entirely by the enthusiasm of their invention, the head of the concern, Aleck Huggins, whose money had made the scheme practicable, was driven by some other motive besides.

He was a party with a deep secret.

Perhaps the nature of this would be revealed to us at some day in the future.

I believed it had much to do with the expedition beneath the waters of the great gulf.

Sitting there I enjoyed their conversation, but all the while picked up very little knowledge.

All I knew was that I had engaged to accompany these three adventurous young fellows in a strange voyage over and under the waters of the Mexican Gulf, which might be long or short as the circumstances would permit, the said voyage to take place in a new submarine cigar-shaped vessel, called the "Torpedo," the invention of Schuyler and Bates.

I was taking considerable risk, but that was an every-day occurrence in my life.

Any man who prowls about old wrecks as I had done for years, takes his life in his hand every time he goes down.

Familiarity breeds contempt, and this is true with regard to danger as in any other case.

The three young fellows finally brought their conversation to an abrupt close.

"Six o'clock!" announced Schuyler.

I was astonished, for so interested had I become in their talk, that I failed to notice the lapse of time.

"We'll all take dinner together below, and drink to a prosperous voyage. It will be our last meal ashore for many a long day I take it."

These words from Bates surprised me.

While they gathered the charts and other papers together, I turned to Schuyler,

"When do you purpose starting?"

"At ten o'clock to-night, all will be dark and we can get the torpedo-boat out of the secret slip unseen."

"Oh! the moon rises at half-past ten."

"By that time we shall be far on the way down the Mississippi, heading for the jetties."

CHAPTER II.

LEAVING NEW ORLEANS.

We had a jolly dinner.

Everything that the market could afford was placed on the table before us.

Philip and Andrew were merry.

Aleck Huggins, the young capitalist, did not join in their fun.

His face was pale.

I could see that look of determination there, and I again realized that he had more of a stake in the success of the new invention than any of us had realized—at least, speaking for myself.

At nine o'clock we left the St. Charles Hotel.

Twenty-eight minutes later we were on the bank of the mighty river, at a point where some private ships and docks were situated.

Schuyler unlocked the gate.

We carried my luggage from the hack that had brought us to this place.

Then the gates were closed.

All was darkness.

I could just make out a rude building that looked like a shed, erected over a slip.

Beyond, out on the river, lights gleamed.

These proceeded from the various vessels, some of which were anchored, others fastened with heavy hawsers to certain docks.

A light flashed up inside the shed.

It proceeded from electricity.

As I entered my eyes fell upon the object that rested upon the water.

To me it had the appearance of an immense cigar, almost fifty feet in length, by some ten or twelve in breadth.

All I could see was that it was made of iron plates, painted black, and had a scuttle or hatch situated just aft of the central point.

The electric light came from bull's-eyes forward, and was of startling power.

Quickly my duffle was taken aboard.

"Now enter, Mr. Ainsworth."

I dropped down the ladder.

Schuyler followed, and I heard the trap fastened.

"All ready, Andrew."

Philip went to the table and arranged his charts, while Bates busied himself at the machinery.

I was not in their secrets.

Even had I desired I could not have learned how many things were done, as I do not profess to understand the methods of intricate machinery.

On this trip I was merely an assistant.

When I saw certain things done I was content to know the fact without trying to puzzle out the cause.

It was just like a man walking—he knows he can cause his legs to move fast or slow, but the mystery of it all is beyond his ken.

We do not bother ourselves over such things.

So I soon rested content with facts, and did not worry over the marvelous forces that were the cause of these wonderful movements.

When the great submarine torpedo boat becomes the property of the government—as it will in the near future, negotiations being already in progress with the Secretary of the Navy—the public will no doubt be given a full description of her hidden forces, and her capacity for inflicting terrible damage upon hostile war vessels at sea or in port.

I looked around with great interest.

Of course I knew the main power of the boat was electricity, and this no doubt was generated by a beautiful little engine, noiselessly running five minutes after we entered the boat, being fed by oil.

From time to time new discoveries were made, which I shall speak of in turn.

Philip and Aleck pored over the charts for a long time, while the engine worked away in a silent but powerful manner.

I looked at a clock fastened above—everything was secured so that it would not be affected by the most severe rolling of the vessel.

It lacked one minute of ten.

Would Philip keep his word?

I never knew him to vary a particle.

He looked up.

"Andrew!"

How muffled his voice sounded inside that hollow cylinder.

"Ay, ay."

"Are you ready?"

"Yes."

I heard a small bell clang.

Then came a rushing sound.

We were leaving the slip.

"Come here, John," said Aleck.

He was at one bull's-eye forward, while the skipper, Philip Schuyler, stood at the other, manipulating the little wheel.

As I stepped over to his side, I heard a single bell ring and gradually the torpedo boat stopped.

"Ready?" asked Philip.

"Down she goes."

Aleck put his finger on a button and held it there.

I heard a strange, gurgling sound.

Great heavens! we were sinking to the bottom of the mighty Mississippi.

"Watch the register, John."

I saw what was meant.

By some subtle means, as we sank, each foot of depth was marked upon an instrument fastened to the wall, and looking like a barometer.

By its side was another to test our speed, while the usual nautical instruments, from a compass to quadrant and sextant, were near by.

At nineteen feet we rested upon the mud.

One thing astounded me.

The force of the electric light was turned forward with such power, that even through the turgid river-water we could see some distance.

In the clear gulf our vision would be great.

The three congratulated each other on the ease with which the descent had been made.

Then the Vampire was raised several feet from the river bottom, and began to move forward.

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